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MIGRATORY FARMWORKERS IN NEW YORK CHANGES, 1953, 1957 AND 1958

A Progress Report

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The number of migratory farmworkers in New York State has declined in recent years. The 1957-58 business recession and increased use of machinery were major factors contributing to this change.

Between 1953 and 1958, marked improvements were made in machinery used to harvest fruits and vegetables in New York State. Especially important was the transition of the mechanical beanpicker from the experimental stage in 1953 to the point when in 1958 about 113 were in use. Mechanization of the bean harvest presents some labor-supply problems in the fall harvest of fruits because migrants leave some areas earlier than usual when bean-picking work is not available.

The proportion of the total camp population made up of workers and the percentage of workers who are males has remained about the same. The age distribution of migrant workers is generally similar for the three study years.

Although turnover in New York's migratory farm labor force continues to be high, the percentage of workers who are experienced in crop work and the percentage of workers with previous migratory work experience in New York is increasing.

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Workers in the 1958 sample averaged 184 days of employment during the 12 months preceding interview, compared with 188 and 208 days for workers in the 1957 and 1953 samples, respectively. Average annual earnings are increasing, but total earnings from work in New York locations have changed very little.

This progress report shows some of the results of research studies of migratory farmworkers in New York State made in 1953, 1957, and 1958. 3/ It includes information about the size and composition of the Negro migratory labor force in the 1953, 1957, and 1958 midseason harvest of fruits and vegetables in New York State.

PURPOSE OF REPORT

This report is intended to summarize the research findings on:

(1) Changes occurring between 1957 and 1958 in regard to the size of the migratory farm labor force working in New York State and factors affecting changes in the size of the labor force.

(2) Changes in the composition of the migratory work force between 1953, 1957, and 1958.

(3) Earnings of migratory farmworkers in 1953, 1957, and 1958.

SOURCES OF INFORMATION FOR THE REPORT

Data for this report are from surveys of migratory workers and their families made in 1953, 1957 and 1958, and from a survey of migrant labor employers made in 1958. All of these surveys were made during the months of August and September in order to sample the migrant population at or near its peak. Information was obtained directly from workers and employers by trained interviewers. The samples were selected statistically in such a way as to be representative.

3/ For additional material based on these studies see Larson, O. F. and Sharp, E. F., Migratory Farm Workers in the Atlantic Coast Stream: Changes in New York, 1953-1957, N. Y. (Cornell) Agr. Expt. Sta. Bul. (In Press); and Sharp, E. F., and Larson, O. F., Migratory Farm Workers in New York State - 1958: A Special Report for the New York State Joint Legislative Committee on Migrant Labor, Cornell University, Ithaca, N. Y., Jan. 21, 1959.

Samples for both worker surveys were drawn from lists of all labor camps registered with the New York State Health Department during the previous year. However, the worker interviews were limited to domestic Negro migrants and therefore, all generalizations based on the worker samples are applicable only to the Negro workers and their families. Domestic Negro workers comprise an estimated 80 percent of all migratory agricultural workers in New York State. The 1953 survey in 39 camps in 15 counties throughout the State resulted in information on 650 workers and 257 nonworkers for a total of 907 migrants. In 1957, interviewing took place in 52 camps in 18 counties of the State and resulted in information on 942 workers and 244 nonworkers, or a total of 1,186 persons. Interviewing for the 1958 study involved 76 camps in 27 counties and resulted in information on 805 workers and 205 nonworkers for a total of 1,010 migrants.

The sample for the 1958 operator survey was the same as that for the 1958 survey of Negro workers, except that interviewing was not limited to camps housing Negro workers. This sample included 111 camps and operators of 102 camps were interviewed. Four camps were dropped from the sample because they had been closed for two or more seasons. Operators of five of the camps could not be contacted during the interview period.

The three surveys were made by the New York State College of Agriculture under cooperative or contract arrangements with the Farm Economics Research Division, Agricultural Research Service, U. S. Department of Agriculture.

CHANGES IN SIZE OF MIGRATORY LABOR FORCE

Operators of each of the farm labor camps in the 1958 sample were asked to give information on the peak number of workers (Negro, Puerto Rican, and other workers) housed in their camps during 1957 and the peak number that had been, or would be, housed in their camps during 1958. If changes were indicated, the operators were asked the reasons for such changes. The information obtained shows that:

Numbers of migratory workers in New York declined considerably between 1957 and 1958. The information supplied by the camp operators indicated that there were 17 percent fewer workers in the sample camps in 1958 than in 1957. This reduction resulted from a reduction in the number of workers housed in some camps and from failure to open for the 1958 season of a small number of sample camps that were in operation during 1957. The amount of decline is doubtless overstated, as the sample did not include camps opening for the first time in 1958. There seems to be little doubt, however, that the size of the total migratory work force in New York declined between 1957 and 1958.

A major factor in the decline in numbers of migratory workers is the increased use of machinery. The machine with the greatest immediate effect on utilization of migrant labor in New York State is the mechanical snap bean harvester. Although adoption of this machine is far from universal, its increased use necessitates adjustments in regard to both number of migrants utilized and length of time for which they are employed.

In 1953, the mechanical beanpicker was experimental. In 1956, 19 mechanical beanpickers were reported in operation in New York State compared with 73 in 1957 and 113 in 1958.

As mentioned earlier, mechanization of the bean harvest has caused some migratory workers to leave New York earlier than usual. The early departure of workers has presented a labor-supply problem for some growers who have fruits to be harvested in the fall and who in the past have depended upon workers employed in the earlier bean harvest.

In commenting on the significance of mechanical harvesting of snap beans, R. B. How concludes that: "The decline in importance of hand labor for harvesting will likely result in beans being grown in areas where migrant labor was not previously used, and in changes in enterprises on farms formerly growing beans in combination with crops for early and late season harvesting." 4/

The 1957-58 business recession appears to have influenced the utilization of migrant labor to some extent. A small number of camp operators reported using less migrant help this year because more local help was available. This increased availability of day-haul workers apparently had more effect on the labor force of processing plants than on those of farm operators.

The greatest relative decline in number of workers occurred in the sample camps housing more than 150 migrants and in those housing fewer than 25 migrants. The greatest stability was shown by the camps of intermediate size. Operators of sample camps that housed 150 or more migrants in 1957 reported a net decline between 1957 and 1958 equivalent to 31 percent of the 1957 worker population. Operators of camps housing fewer than 25 migrants reported a 21-percent decline and the intermediate group, which housed between 25 and 150 migrants, reported a decline of 8 percent.

4/ How, R. B., Some Economic Aspects of Mechanical Snap Bean Harvesting in New York, AE Ext. 1, Cornell University, Ithaca, N. Y., July 1958.

Operators of migrant labor camps indicated that they expect to employ fewer migrants in 1959. The number of workers in 1959 will doubtless depend upon crop and weather conditions existing during the season. For the sample as a whole, camp operators and employers expected to employ approximately 10 percent fewer migrants in 1959 than they employed in 1958. A number of operators, however, indicated that they expected to increase their use of migrant help in 1959.

CHANGES IN COMPOSITION OF THE NEGRO MIGRATORY LABOR FORCE

It is important to know whether the composition and characteristics of the migrant labor force are stable, whether trends in a particular direction are underway, or whether there are wide year-to-year fluctuations which arise entirely from conditions that exist only during a particular year. As summarized below, comparision of the data for 1958 with the information from the 1953 and 1957 studies shows stability in some characteristics, trends in some respects, and fluctuation in still other characteristics.

The proportion of the total camp population made up of workers remains very nearly the same. Workers made up 80 percent of the 1958 camp population as compared with 79 percent at midseason 1957. This difference is small; it is noteworthy only in that the change is consistent with the pattern that has seen the percentage of migrants who are workers increase from 72 percent in 1953 to the present 80 percent.

The percentage of workers who are males also remains at about the same level. In 1958, 73 percent of the Negro migrant workers were males. This increase of only 1 percent over 1957 is very small as compared with the increase from 58 percent in 1953 to 72 percent in 1957.

The age distribution of the total migrant camp population was generally similar for the study years 1953, 1957, and 1958. In general, the age distribution of the 1958 resident camp population (workers and nonworkers combined) indicates that the differences between 1953 and 1958 were more or less chance fluctuations and did not indicate consistent patterns of change. In 1958, 18 percent of the resident camp population was under 14 years of age as compared with 19 percent in 1957. Both years are considerably below the 23 percent reported in 1953, which indicates a probable trend toward fewer children in camps.

Except for children under 14 years of age, no consistent patterns of change are indicated. The proportion aged 14 to 19 was 16 percent in 1958

as compared with 14 percent in both 1953 and 1957. Adults aged 20 to 44 made up 52 percent of the 1958 sample and 50 percent in each of the previous years. A reversal in direction of change is found in the proportion who are 45 years of age or older. This proportion increased from 12 percent in 1953 to 17 percent in 1957 and then declined to 14 percent in 1958.

The age distribution of migrant workers is generally similar for the three study years 1953, 1957, and 1958. No consistent patterns of change are found in the age distributions of workers. The proportion of all workers who were under 20 years of age was 19 percent in 1958 and 18 percent in both 1957 and 1953. The proportion who were 45 years of age and older was 17 percent in 1958, 21 percent in 1957, and 16 percent in 1953. The 1958 sample shows 64 percent of the workers to be within the 20 to 44 year age range as compared with 16 percent in 1957 and 66 percent in 1953.

The percentage of workers with previous migratory work experience in New York State is increasing. Of all workers in the 1958 sample, 65 percent had done crop work in the State previously. This is an increase from 60 percent in 1957 and 56 percent in 1953.

The percentage of workers who are inexperienced in crop work appeared to be somewhat lower in 1958. One-fourth of the workers in 1958 were in their first year of crop work, as compared with 28 percent in 1957 and 32 percent in 1953. The proportion who had begun crop work within the last 4 years was 48 percent in 1958 as compared with 57 percent in 1957 and 54 percent in 1953.

No consistent patterns of change in regard to place of origin of the workers are indicated. Differences in place of origin of workers reflect year-to-year differences in recruiting practices as well as changes in the characteristics of workers in the migrant stream. This fact may well account for the lack of consistency in the statistics for the survey years. In 1958, 72 percent of the workers reported having spent most of the previous winter in Florida. In 1957, 61 percent of the workers had wintered in Florida, and in 1953 the proportion was 76 percent. The proportion of workers who were born in Florida or Georgia was 52 percent in 1958, 47 percent in 1957, and 66 percent in 1953.

The degree to which the 1958 workers specialized in crop work is about the same as for previous years. Work in crops was the major activity of two-fifths of the workers in the 1958 sample as compared with 43 percent of the 1957 workers and 42 percent of the 1953 workers.

EARNINGS AND DAYS WORKED

Many migrants who do crop work in New York State work only part of the year and many others do crop work on a part-time or temporary basis. They work at other employment, keep house, or attend school during some part of the year. The figures on earnings given below are for all employment and so include wages from nonfarm as well as from farm work. Also, the average earnings include those of both men and women and of workers of all ages. It is known that men have higher average and daily earnings than women and that adults average more than teen-age workers.

The amount of work performed is decreasing. Workers in the 1958 sample averaged 184 days of employment during the 12 months preceding interview. Workers in the 1957 sample averaged 188 days, and the 1953 workers 208 days. The decrease reported in 1958 reflects several factors, including the effect of the winter freezes in Florida during December 1957 and January 1958 and the general employment levels of 1957-58.

Average annual earnings are increasing. Workers in the 1958 sample averaged $1,262 in wages during the 12 months preceding interview, as compared with $1,205 for the 1957 workers. Although a comparable figure is not available for the 1953 workers, an analysis of the distribution of these workers by income categories indicates that their average annual earnings were well below either the 1957 or 1958 averages.

Little change is found in total earnings from work in New York locations. Workers in the 1958 sample averaged $340 in wages from work in New York locations as compared with $319 in 1957 and $324 in 1953.